

The Resurrection of Jesus

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SUMMARY

Examines the historical grounds for belief in Jesus' resurrection, focusing on the empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

I spoke recently at a major Canadian university on the existence of God. After my talk, one slightly irate co-ed wrote on her comment card, "I was with you until you got to the stuff about Jesus. God is not the Christian God!"

This attitude is all too typical today. Most people are happy to agree that God exists; but in our pluralistic society it has become politically incorrect to claim that God has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus. What justification can Christians offer, in contrast to Hindus, Jews, and Muslims, for thinking that the Christian God is real?

The answer of the New Testament is: the resurrection of Jesus. "God will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17.31). The resurrection is God's vindication of Jesus' radical personal claims to divine authority.

So how do we know that Jesus is risen from the dead? The Easter hymnwriter says, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!" This answer is perfectly appropriate on an individual level. But when Christians engage unbelievers in the public square—such as in "Letters to the Editor" of a local newspaper, on call-in programs on talk-radio, at PTA meetings, or even just in conversation with co-workers—, then it's crucial that we be able to present objective evidence in support of our beliefs. Otherwise our claims hold no more water than the assertions of anyone else claiming to have a private experience of God.

Fortunately, Christianity, as a religion rooted in history, makes claims that can in important measure be investigated historically. Suppose, then, that we approach the New Testament writings, not as inspired Scripture, but merely as a collection of Greek documents coming down to us out of the first century, without any assumption as to their reliability other than the way we normally regard other sources of ancient history. We may be surprised to learn that the majority of New Testament critics investigating the gospels in this way accept the central facts undergirding

the resurrection of Jesus. I want to emphasize that I am not talking about evangelical or conservative scholars only, but about the broad spectrum of New Testament critics who teach at secular universities and non-evangelical seminaries. Amazing as it may seem, most of them have come to regard as historical the basic facts which support the resurrection of Jesus. These facts are as follows:

FACT #1: *After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.* This fact is highly significant because it means, contrary to radical critics like John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar, that the location of Jesus' burial site was known to Jew and Christian alike. In that case, the disciples could never have proclaimed his resurrection in Jerusalem if the tomb had not been empty. New Testament researchers have established this first fact on the basis of evidence such as the following:

1. Jesus' burial is attested in the very old tradition quoted by Paul in I Cor. 15.3-5:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:

. . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

Paul not only uses the typical rabbinical terms "received" and "delivered" with regard to the information he is passing on to the Corinthians, but vv. 3-5 are a highly stylized four-line formula filled with non-Pauline characteristics. This has convinced all scholars that Paul is, as he says, quoting from an old tradition which he himself received after becoming a Christian. This tradition probably goes back at least to Paul's fact-finding visit to Jerusalem around AD 36, when he spent two weeks with Cephas and James (Gal. 1.18). It thus dates to within five years after Jesus' death. So short a time span and such personal contact make it idle to talk of legend in this case.

2. The burial story is part of very old source material used by Mark in writing his gospel. The gospels tend to consist of brief snapshots of Jesus' life which are loosely connected and not always chronologically arranged. But when we come to the passion story we do have one, smooth, continuously-running narrative. This suggests that the passion story was one of Mark's sources of information in writing his gospel. Now most scholars think Mark is already the earliest gospel, and Mark's source for Jesus' passion is, of course, even older. Comparison of the narratives of the four gospels shows that their accounts do not diverge from one another until *after* the burial. This

implies that the burial account was part of the passion story. Again, its great age militates against its being legendary.

3. As a member of the Jewish court that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a Christian invention. There was strong resentment against the Jewish leadership for their role in the condemnation of Jesus (I Thess. 2.15). It is therefore highly improbable that Christians would invent a member of the court that condemned Jesus who honors Jesus by giving him a proper burial instead of allowing him to be dispatched as a common criminal.

4. No other competing burial story exists. If the burial by Joseph were fictitious, then we would expect to find either some historical trace of what actually happened to Jesus' corpse or at least some competing legends. But all our sources are unanimous on Jesus' honorable interment by Joseph.

For these and other reasons, the majority of New Testament critics concur that Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. According to the late John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge University, the burial of Jesus in the tomb is "one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus. [1]"

FACT #2: On the Sunday following the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers. Among the reasons which have led most scholars to this conclusion are the following:

1. The empty tomb story is also part of the old passion source used by Mark. The passion source used by Mark did not end in death and defeat, but with the empty tomb story, which is grammatically of one piece with the burial story.

2. The old tradition cited by Paul in I Cor. 15.3-5 implies the fact of the empty tomb. For any first century Jew, to say that of a dead man "that he was buried and that he was raised" is to imply that a vacant grave was left behind. Moreover, the expression "on the third day" probably derives from the women's visit to the tomb on the third day, in Jewish reckoning, after the crucifixion. The four-line tradition cited by Paul summarizes both the gospel accounts and the early apostolic preaching (Acts 13. 28-31); significantly, the third line of the tradition corresponds to the empty tomb story.

3. The story is simple and lacks signs of legendary embellishment. All one has to do to appreciate this point is to compare Mark's account with the wild legendary stories found in the second-century apocryphal gospels, in which Jesus is seen coming out of the tomb with his head reaching up

above the clouds and followed by a talking cross!

4. The fact that women's testimony was discounted in first century Palestine stands in favor of the women's role in discovering the empty tomb. According to Josephus, the testimony of women was regarded as so worthless that it could not even be admitted into a Jewish court of law. Any later legendary story would certainly have made male disciples discover the empty tomb.

5. The earliest Jewish allegation that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body (Matt. 28.15) shows that the body was in fact missing from the tomb. The earliest Jewish response to the disciples' proclamation, "He is risen from the dead!" was not to point to his occupied tomb and to laugh them off as fanatics, but to claim that they had taken away Jesus' body. Thus, we have evidence of the empty tomb from the very opponents of the early Christians.

One could go on, but I think that enough has been said to indicate why, in the words of Jacob Kremer, an Austrian specialist in the resurrection, "By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements concerning the empty tomb." [2]

FACT #3: On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

This is a fact which is almost universally acknowledged among New Testament scholars, for the following reasons:

1. The list of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection appearances which is quoted by Paul in I Cor. 15. 5-7 guarantees that such appearances occurred. These included appearances to Peter (Cephas), the Twelve, the 500 brethren, and James.

2. The appearance traditions in the gospels provide multiple, independent attestation of these appearances. This is one of the most important marks of historicity. The appearance to Peter is independently attested by Luke, and the appearance to the Twelve by Luke and John. We also have independent witness to Galilean appearances in Mark, Matthew, and John, as well as to the women in Matthew and John.

3. Certain appearances have earmarks of historicity. For example, we have good evidence from the gospels that neither James nor any of Jesus' younger brothers believed in him during his lifetime. There is no reason to think that the early church would generate fictitious stories concerning the unbelief of Jesus' family had they been faithful followers all along. But it is indisputable that James and his brothers did become active Christian believers following Jesus'

death. James was considered an apostle and eventually rose to the position of leadership of the Jerusalem church. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, James was martyred for his faith in Christ in the late AD 60s. Now most of us have brothers. What would it take to convince you that your brother is the Lord, such that you would be ready to die for that belief? Can there be any doubt that this remarkable transformation in Jesus' younger brother took place because, in Paul's words, "then he appeared to James"?

Even Gert L. demann, the leading German critic of the resurrection, himself admits, "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ." [3]

FACT #4: The original disciples believed that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary. Think of the situation the disciples faced after Jesus' crucifixion:

1. Their leader was dead. And Jews had no belief in a dying, much less rising, Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to throw off Israel's enemies (= Rome) and re-establish a Davidic reign—not suffer the ignominious death of criminal.

2. According to Jewish law, Jesus' execution as a criminal showed him out to be a heretic, a man literally under the curse of God (Deut. 21.23). The catastrophe of the crucifixion for the disciples was not simply that their Master was gone, but that the crucifixion showed, in effect, that the Pharisees had been right all along, that for three years they had been following a heretic, a man accursed by God!

3. Jewish beliefs about the afterlife precluded anyone's rising from the dead to glory and immortality before the general resurrection at the end of the world. All the disciples could do was to preserve their Master's tomb as a shrine where his bones could reside until that day when all of Israel's righteous dead would be raised by God to glory.

Despite all this, the original disciples believed in and were willing to go to their deaths for the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Luke Johnson, a New Testament scholar from Emory University, muses, "some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was" [4] N. T. Wright, an eminent British scholar, concludes, "that is why, as a historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him." [5]

In summary, there are four facts agreed upon by the majority of scholars who have written on

these subjects which any adequate historical hypothesis must account for: Jesus' entombment by Joseph of Arimathea, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection.

Now the question is: what is the best explanation of these four facts? Most scholars probably remain agnostic about this question. But the Christian can maintain that the hypothesis that best explains these facts is "God raised Jesus from the dead."

In his book *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, historian C. B. McCullagh lists six tests which historians use in determining what is the best explanation for given historical facts. [6] The hypothesis "God raised Jesus from the dead" passes all these tests:

1. It has great *explanatory scope*: it explains why the tomb was found empty, why the disciples saw post-mortem appearances of Jesus, and why the Christian faith came into being.
2. It has great *explanatory power*: it explains why the body of Jesus was gone, why people repeatedly saw Jesus alive despite his earlier public execution, and so forth.
3. It is *plausible*: given the historical context of Jesus' own unparalleled life and claims, the resurrection serves as divine confirmation of those radical claims.
4. It is *not ad hoc* or *contrived*: it requires only one additional hypothesis: that God exists. And even that needn't be an additional hypothesis if one already believes that God exists.
5. It is *in accord with accepted beliefs*. The hypothesis: "God raised Jesus from the dead" doesn't in any way conflict with the accepted belief that people don't rise *naturally* from the dead. The Christian accepts *that* belief as wholeheartedly as he accepts the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead.
6. It *far outstrips any of its rival hypotheses in meeting conditions (1)-(5)*. Down through history various alternative explanations of the facts have been offered, for example, the conspiracy hypothesis, the apparent death hypothesis, the hallucination hypothesis, and so forth. Such hypotheses have been almost universally rejected by contemporary scholarship. None of these naturalistic hypotheses succeeds in meeting the conditions as well as the resurrection hypothesis.

Now this puts the sceptical critic in a rather desperate situation. A few years ago I participated in a debate on the resurrection of Jesus with a professor at the University of California, Irvine. He had written his doctoral dissertation on the resurrection, and he was thoroughly familiar with the evidence. He could not deny the facts of Jesus' honorable burial, empty tomb, post-mortem

appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection. So his only recourse was to come up with some alternate explanation of those facts. And so he argued that *Jesus of Nazareth had an unknown, identical twin brother*, who was separated from him as an infant and grew up independently, but who came back to Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, stole Jesus' body out of the tomb, and presented himself to the disciples, who mistakenly inferred that Jesus was risen from the dead! Now I won't bother to go into how I went about refuting this theory. But I think the example is illustrative of the desperate lengths to which scepticism must go in order to refute the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, the evidence is so powerful that one of the world's leading *Jewish* theologians, the late Pinchas Lapide, who taught at Hebrew University in Israel, declared himself convinced on the basis of the evidence that the God of Israel raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead! [7]

The significance of the resurrection of Jesus lies in the fact that it is not just any old Joe Blow who has been raised from the dead, but Jesus of Nazareth, whose crucifixion was instigated by the Jewish leadership because of his blasphemous claims to divine authority. If this man has been raised from the dead, then the God whom he allegedly blasphemed has clearly vindicated his claims. Thus, in an age of religious relativism and pluralism, the resurrection of Jesus constitutes a solid rock on which Christians can take their stand for God's decisive self-revelation in Jesus.

Footnotes

[1] John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 131.

[2] Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien—Geschichten um Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), pp. 49-50.

[3] Gerd Lademann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 80.

[4] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 136.

[5] N. T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus," *Christianity Today* (September 13, 1993), p. 26.

[6] C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 19.

[7] Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (London: SPCK, 19